DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 259 360 CS 209 097

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TITLE The Performance-Appraisal Interview: An Alternative to Simulation.
PUB DATE Apr 84
NOTE 12p.; In: Professional Communication in the Modern World: Proceedings of the American Business Communication Association Southeast Convention (31st, Hammond, LA, April 5-7, 1984) p103-112.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Business Communication; Case Studies; *Class Activities; Education Work Relationship; *Employment Interviews; Higher Education; *Interpersonal Communication; Interpersonal Competence; *Job Performance; Personnel Evaluation; Role Playing; Simulation; Student Evaluation; Teacher Role; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

Offering instruction in performance appraisal (PA) skills as well as in selection interviewing contributes to business communication students' potential for finding the most appropriate job and keeping it. Students and faculty can benefit from the recognition that in appraisals of performance effective communication behavior is a key indicator of success on the job. Employee interpersonal communication skills are cited as among the top factors influencing a high performance rating. One of the most prevalent approaches to training for the PA is the case study exercise. However, its weaknesses create problems for students in identifying with the content and the process of the PA. A reality based approach can overcome these weaknesses by creating a one-on-one correspondence between the appraisal process as it occurs in business and industry and the assignment administered in class. This necessitates a two-part assignment: the informational interview related to the profession of the student's choice, and the PA interview. Students submit tapes of their informational interview for review, and then undergo a performance evaluation with the instructor. While this method requires a great deal of time, students in these interviews generate a higher degree of commitment than students who role-play in case studies. The assignments can often be more relevant for students than their courses, and the informational courses and interview allow them to establish job contacts. (HTH)

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THE PERFORMANCE-APPRAISAL INTERVIEW: AN ALTERNATIVE TO SIMULATION

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CS209047

In *Professional Communication in the Modern World:*
Proceedings of the American Business Communication Association
31st Southeast Convention 1984
Compiled and edited by Richard David Ramsey
Hammond, Louisiana, U.S.A.
Southeastern Louisiana University
1984 April 5-7

THE PERFORMANCE-APPRAISAL INTERVIEW: AN ALTERNATIVE TO SIMULATION

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ABSTRACT

The paper advances a method for teaching the performance-appraisal interview to advanced undergraduates using a faculty member as the appraiser and students as appraisees. A prior assignment, a career-related informational interview, was used as the basis for evaluating the interviewing behavior of each student in a performance-appraisal interview. The paper explores the legitimacy of faculty conduct of performance appraisals and the rationale for teaching the interview in the college curriculum. It also cites the disadvantages that are encountered with standard case study and roleplaying activities now in vogue, in contrast with the advantages of the reality-based method described in this paper. The assignment offers career relevance, practice in actual appraising for faculty and students, and detailed feedback for the student of his or her communication competence in interviewing. The criteria used in evaluating the students' communication competence for both the informational interview and the performance-appraisal interview are set forth to clarify the grading function.

INTRODUCTION

A professional speech communication consultant to business and industry talked with a curious throng of college faculty at a meeting of the Texas Speech Communication Association at its Houston convention in 1982, answering questions about consulting. When asked whether her firm gave interviewing workshops, she replied: "We don't but there are at least fifty firms in this area that do. I have talked to many a trainer who is struggling to teach managers and employees how to handle those performance appraisals." For the college communication educators an important question arose, "What can colleges and universities do to better prepare their students for appraisal interviews?"

Secondary questions surfaced in my own attempt to resolve the general issue. For instance, how well prepared are speech communication and business faculty to teach performance-appraisal (PA) interviewing? In addition, why should this instruction be the responsibility of the institution of higher education? Furthermore, if the responsibility

for this instruction is assumed, what goals should the instruction aspire to achieve and how are these interviews taught? Finally, I wanted to consider which teaching methodology would prove most effective in developing realistic skills in performance-appraisal interviewing.

GENERAL FACULTY PREPAREDNESS FOR TEACHING THE APPRAISAL INTERVIEW

Faculty preparedness to teach the performance-appraisal interview can be seen as a variable phenomenon based on each faculty member's experience in oral-skills evaluation. Those who regularly critique student performance in public speaking courses, debate courses, group discussions, and other performance events are especially well-suited for teaching PA interviews and in conducting them. Appraisal, other than in written examinations, is a necessary part of such courses. It can be argued that most teachers are prepared to appraise student performance to some degree.

Teachers and trainers are not strangers to the concepts of judgment and development (Brinkerhoff & Kanter, 1980). Educators for centuries have addressed student weaknesses and prescribed remedial strategies to improve student performance. The stereotype of the stern school marm enforcing correct responses with her ever-active peach tree switch is balanced by her opposite--an understanding motherly figure who encourages her charges with positive challenges and nurturing admonitions. Whereas these critical and helpful behaviors of educators have not been formally labelled "performance appraisal," that is in fact what they are.

The dual functions of performance appraisal--judgment and development--create a puzzling dilemma for the educator. Some faculty perceive judgment as the sole function of the instructor while others work exclusively to motivate and develop students. The goal for effective appraisal is to blend the two components in such a way that the student is aware of weaknesses and strengths but is capably directed toward productive achievement.

Performance appraisal is a common instructional tool. Those teachers in colleges and universities who teach interviewing skills, whether they hail from colleges of business or communication, are reasonably well qualified to train students in the appraisal of performance. This paper examines the reasons for teaching performance-appraisal (PA) interviewing skills to students as well as the goals of such instruction. The next section notes the limitations of case studies and roleplaying strategies and proposes a reality-based approach in teaching the PA.

REASONS FOR TEACHING THE APPRAISAL INTERVIEW TO COLLEGE STUDENTS

Students of the 1980s have become more pragmatic in their pursuit of college degrees. Institutions across the nation have experienced increased enrollment in degree programs that promise high-yield financial rewards as well as job availability. With this trend

come students with renewed interest in improving skills that will assist them in achieving their career goals. Offering instruction in performance-appraisal skills as well as selection interviewing contributes to the student's potential for finding the most appropriate job and in maintaining it.

Most students in upper-division communication courses required by business and engineering colleges are career bound. They expect to land a good job after graduation. Many of these learners will experience appraisals of their own performance as their initiation into the post-probationary period in their first year of employment. Pre-employment rehearsal of the interview gives the new employee a step up--if only in striving to create a positive predisposition toward the PA process.

Some of the students in the communication skills courses, particularly those with management credentials, may find themselves as assistant managers actually conducting appraisals of other employees. Whether students will engage in appraisal interviews as subordinates or supervisors, one thing is abundantly clear. Exposure to the PA interview can only prepare them for on-the-job evaluations where the risks are higher than a grade in a course, but may mean continued employment.

Students and faculty can benefit from the recognition that in appraisals of performance effective communication behavior is a key indicator of success on the job. A 1982 critical incident study of managers appraising job performance by Hugo (1982) at the University of Denver supports this assumption. The Hugo study indicated that employee interpersonal communication skills were among the top factors cited as a reason for high ratings in PAs. Conversely, poor interpersonal skills were noted as a significant reason for lower ratings. While most interpersonal communication professors understand the difficulties involved in teaching interpersonal skills, knowing that communication competence is a factor in employment evaluation can be a persuasive incentive for students to examine these skills.

The PA interview may also function in several ways as a symbol for both management and the employee. It may telegraph the personal maturity of the employee (and of the manager). This maturity is tied to the capacity to respond to both encouraging and critical evaluation responsibly in a problem-solving mode. In addition, the PA can reflect the employee's and the manager's ability to recognize performance-related work goals as well as planning for career enrichment. Finally, the PA interview may serve as a vehicle for the employee to assert control over his or her own career by clarifying personal aspirations and desires as well as designing programs to meet those ideals.

From the student's perspective, learning about and experiencing the PA can serve to prepare him or her for relevant, on-the-job experiences; can identify specific skills for the potential worker to improve before employment; and can offer the student an opportunity to participate in his or her own career design.

However, the benefits derived from teaching the PA are not limited to the student. Faculty members studying the PA literature develop a fuller sense of their own managerial roles in the teaching-learning process. When teachers can frame their actions within a business and professional context, as managers, teaching the PA takes on a different tone. The classroom becomes a training ground for the anticipated activity rather than a holding tank of students in a required course. The research necessary for thorough teaching of the PA can also serve a development function for the faculty member as a manager-educator. The PA literature can help to clarify the goals and objectives of the appraisal process and inform the educator of current trends.

GOALS OF PA IN THE INSTRUCTIONAL SETTING

The goals of the PA process have been stated in a variety of ways since Meyer et al. (1965). While the point of emphasis may vary, most could agree with the spirit of the goals set forth by Resnick and Mohrman (1982). In their three-year study of performance appraisal designs they synthesized the following goals of the PA:

- Measure performance
- Motivate employees
- Improve performance
- Plan future work
- Teach employees what they should do
- Distribute pay raises

Virtually all of these goals can be translated into the classroom PA learning experience. Even the last goal of remuneration can be converted into a tangible reward as a grade or a rating. Student conferences have achieved many of these goals for teachers and trainers although in a much less structured way than in the formal appraisal of performance.

Acknowledging that sufficient reasons exist to teach performance appraisal in college classrooms and that the goals of the performance appraisal can be legitimately met within the educational context, it may be instructive to examine the difficulties currently confronted with traditional methods of teaching the PA via case-study and role-playing.

TRADITIONAL CASE-STUDY OR ROLE-PLAYING TEACHING STRATEGIES

Certainly one of the most prevalent approaches to training for the PA is the case study exercise. A number of interviewing texts offer interesting cases and ask students to consider the case, specifically illustrating a typical problem or issue in appraisal. The Sincoff and Goyer (1984, p. 147) text Interviewing provides a typical example of the

approach. The exercise advises the student to

> Prepare a case of approximately three hundred words in which you are the appraisee. The case may be similar in form to the one in Exercise 3. The case should be a brief description of your job duties, the goals of your performance, and your attitudes toward your work. The case may be real . . . or imaginary.
>
> a. Give the case to a classmate who has been assigned as the appraiser. You will be the appraisee.
> b. Conduct the interview in class. When the interview is over, give the case to your instructor for evaluation.

The case study, roleplay method may in fact be the next best thing to being there. However, its weaknesses create problems for students in identifying with the content and the process in PA. First, a credibility gap exists for the roleplay based on a case study. Students are asked to suspend their disbelief, imagining the situation to be an organically real reproduction. If the case is not relevant to the life experience of the roleplayer, then motivation to suspend disbelief is reduced. This is a sophisticated skill and may be hard to achieve. Even if students are able to screen out the noise based on this acting principle of role-taking, a second factor usually intervenes, exacerbating the inherent difficulties.

The event normally occurs in front of an audience. To this end, the roleplay is perceived as a performance for others rather than an authentic action emerging from a legitimate need. This second performance factor can stimulate self-consciousness and frivolity discouraging a professional attitude toward the interview. Another by-product of the performance orientation is, many times, the unsolicited reaction of audience members. Giggles, coughing, squirming and realignment in seats bring the performers back to the realization that the interview is a performed event. Roleplaying skill often depends on the maturity of the participants and the ability of the instructor to teach the techniques quickly and informatively.

This paper does not suggest that case studies and roleplays cannot be helpful tools for students and teachers. For example, the five cases presented in Stewart and Cash's (1982) book, Interviewing: Principles and Practices, provide useful and issue-specific instances which can be used as problem-solving vehicles. The concern here is that they may offer little opportunity to "practice" the mechanics of PA interviewing. An alternative way of teaching the PA follows.

A REALITY-BASED APPROACH TOWARD THE APPRAISAL INTERVIEW

The reality-based approach advocated in this paper must overcome the disadvantages mentioned above. Consequently, it must create a one-on-one correspondence between the appraisal process as it occurs in business and industry and the assignment administered

in class. To produce an assignment that functions as a performance appraisal must function, certain conditions must be met:

- The assignment should serve the student's career goals.[1]
- It should provide a performance or activity to appraise.
- A true supervisor-subordinate position must exist between appraiser and appraisee.
- The tension and concern present in the performance-appraisal situation must exist.
- There must be incentives for skilled problem-solving.
- The event must be treated as a professional business activity.

Description of the Assignments

To present the PA in the most realistic light, the project must incorporate a performance to be appraised. This in turn necessitates the use of a two-part assignment. The first assignment is an informational interview serving as the performance to be appraised. The second assignment is the performance-appraisal interview.

The informational interview is a four-step process. The first step of this four-step process served to set the stage for subsequent activities seeking to generate interest in and provide a rationale for the informational interview. Before students entered the interviewing unit they were asked to read Chapter Five of Bolles' job-hunter's guide What Color Is Your Parachute? The function of the chapter in this assignment was to ask students to clarify their career sights. In this vein, students completed two of the ten career-clarification exercises in this chapter. Exercises ranged from the writing of historical-overview diaries of the student's life experiences to designing the ideal job for the student. All exercises required in-depth re-evaluation of personal goals and functioned as career-values clarification opportunities.

Moving the focus from their relatively clarified career goals, students were asked to identify a specific job they viewed as an interesting job possibility for themselves over the next five years. Once the job had been tagged, they were then responsible for locating someone who held their ideal position, contacting the person, and making an appointment to discuss the nature of the job in an informational

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[1]Students participating in these assignments were 45 upper-division business and engineering students in a required course in Technical Speaking at a major Texas university in the spring and fall semesters of 1983.

interview. Lectures to clarify the interviewing process included organization, questioning strategies, adaptation responses, and presentation of self in the exchange in this second stage.

The third stage involved the development of an appropriate interview schedule that would generate the information the student wanted to know about the position in question. Students were encouraged to clarify the scope of the position, specific duties, challenges in the position, difficulties in the job, prerequisites of the position, and mobility in the position. Although certainly not limited to these questions, a 30-minute time limit was placed on the taped interview. Questions were then evaluated based on effective strategies for constructing questions in Stewart and Cash's text. Students revised questions taking instructor feedback into account.

Finally, students interviewed their prospects. Many of the interviewees were located in the business community, on campus or in the student's hometown. Several students travelled more than 200 miles to interview exactly the person they felt could provide the most personally valuable interview. To encourage commitment to the interview, students were alerted of the evaluation criteria to be used in assessing the quality of the informational interview before they conducted the interviews.

The evaluation criteria for the informational interviews included

- Student skills in establishing tone and clarifying purpose of the interview
- Effectiveness of the questioning strategy
- Ability to provide natural transitions between questions and general conversational tone
- Regulation of interview talk (curtailing tangential responses or soliciting responses of reticent respondents, to name a few)
- Ability to clarify the intent of questions when asked
- Capacity to follow-up on responses of particular interest, generating impromptu questions
- Use of the interview schedule
- Vocal presentation of self
- Concluding strategies
- Preparedness

Each of these elements was rated on a five-point scale making the interview evaluation worth half of the grade on the informational

interview. The exercises from What Color Is Your Parachute? in conjunction with the graded interview schedules comprised the remaining half of the grade. With the informational interviews conducted over a two-week period, students submitted the tapes of their interviews for review and signed up for convenient PA interviews.

The PA interview is complex. To help promote fair evaluation in the PA interview, several precautions were taken. The interviews were standardized as much as possible using evaluation forms and standard formats. During interviews all incoming telephone calls were transferred to the central office, and other faculty were discouraged, by signs on doors, from interrupting the interviews. Students were given copies of the evaluation form prior to the interview, to help them better prepare.

The structure of the interview paralleled the suggestions of King (1984a & 1984b) who asserted that performance appraisals should occur in private, noninterruptive environments; that information gathered for the interview be accurate and fair; that the appraiser safeguard the interview from bias as much as possible; that employees be asked to present a self-appraisal; and that an agenda be followed throughout the interview.

The agenda used for the interviews also followed King's recommendations. First, an opening statement explored the goals of the interview and set an open problem-solving tone for the interview. Second, students were invited to offer their own appraisal of the informational interview providing examples to support their evaluations of strengths and weaknesses. Third, using the critique form which served to evaluate the informational interview, the performance was appraised taking into account those areas where the student recognized his or her strengths and weaknesses in the exchange. Fourth, major problems were examined looking for reasonable solutions that would improve the student's interviewing skills. The student and faculty member established goals and a plan of action for future interviews the student might experience incorporating key aspects of the PA evaluation. Finally the interview was concluded with a general summary and an invitation to the student to evaluate the PA interview. Students were scheduled at 45-minute intervals; usually the interviews lasted 30 minutes, giving the interviewer time to prepare for the next student.

Grading the PA offered the student an incentive much like that of promotion in the business setting. While the appraisal could be an entirely subjective event, many of the evaluation criteria are quantifiable. For example, student preparation for the interview was a crucial criterion. If students had not prepared for their own self-evaluation, they were unable to comment on their strengths and weaknesses effectively and shifted responsibility for the discussion to the appraiser. Poor preparation weakened the interview and reflected negatively on the student's ability to observe the taped interview and to judge the criteria for effective informational interviewing. In general, students who were well prepared diminished the amount of appraiser talk because many of the issues on the critique prepared by the faculty member were clarified earlier by the student.

Advantages and Disadvantages of the Assignment

For students advantages in using this method for teaching the PA are numerous. Students in these interviews generated a higher degree of commitment to the project than did previous students in the same course who had played roles in case studies. Many suggested that the assignment was more relevant for them than were many courses in their majors. Some students received employment queries and job offers after their contact with the resource individuals.

In any desirable project obstacles exist which must be overcome. The most obvious disadvantage in implementing this assignment is the time investment required of both faculty and students. All assignments are carried on outside of class. Faculty must listen to 30-minute tapes of X number of students, evaluating each one. PA conferences double this time commitment, in addition to the time spent grading both interviews. Faculty with graduate assistants might be able to develop a less time-consuming strategy for implementing the assignments. However, the payoff generated by student commitment can encourage faculty to find ways to reduce the barrier of time investment.

CONCLUSION

Few students studying the performance-appraisal process have the opportunity to participate in a real performance-appraisal situation. This paper has presented a reality-based alternative to simulation for speech communication and management professionals teaching PA interviewing. Significant advantages of the approach warrant continued experimentation with the design. In fact, faculty are encouraged to develop meaningful research efforts to compare the long-term effects of simulation training in performance appraisal versus the reality-based approach. In addition, experimentation is recommended to streamline the faculty-time expenditure required in the design presented here. So long as our students are motivated by pragmatic goals it is to our benefit to continue to strive toward academic training that enhances student success in the marketplace. The performance-appraisal interview can serve as a vehicle that narrows the gap between theory and practice, making knowledge useful rather than superfluous.

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